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## Geography and sexuality: Why space (still) matters

**Abstract** In this position piece I reflect on twenty years of research on geographies of sexuality and argue that the contribution of geography to the study of human sexuality remains under-sold and under-appreciated (both within geography itself and the wider social sciences). In part, this is because of a misapprehension that the main contribution of geography of sexualities has been to map the location of gay neighbourhoods (and, to a lesser extent, red-light districts). In this paper I challenge this view by highlighting other empirical foci within the sub-discipline, noting that emerging *relational* understandings of place are encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the varied - and often virtual – sexual spaces of the twenty first century.

### Introduction

When *Sexualities* was first published in 1998, geography was not a discipline recognised as having much to contribute to debates on human sexuality (as compared with, for example, anthropology, sociology, or cultural studies). Indeed, it was as late as 1995 that the first edited collection explicitly addressing the relationship between sexuality and space was published (*Mapping Desire*, edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine), following a flurry of conference activity and networking which began to bring geographers into dialogue with those in other disciplines working on LGBT identities, queer theory and the cultural politics of sexuality. While explaining the emergence and evolution of ‘gay villages’ was to prove a key (and enduring) theme in this nascent collision of spatiality and sexuality, even a casual reading of that initial, important collection indicates a much wider range of possible topics was being flagged for exploration, from the performance of sexuality in homespaces, streetspaces and workspaces through to studies of sex tourism, the geographies of global sex work and white sexual fantasies of post-colonial Others.

Subsequently, sexuality and space studies have delivered on this initial promise, and geography of sexuality is now a well-established, if still small, sub-discipline (whose existence has been recognised by the Association of American Geographers and the Royal Geographical Society, who both have speciality groups dedicated to the study of sexuality, space and queer geographies). Most introductory textbooks in the discipline now pay at least lip service to the idea that sexuality is as fundamental to the making of human geographies as is ethnicity, class, gender or age; geography dictionaries and encyclopedias are littered with entries drawing attention to the specific contributions made to geography by the inclusion of

queer theories and epistemologies. Perhaps most significantly, the central fixation of sexuality and space studies with LGBT identities and gay villages has been complemented by a glut of studies on the geographies of heterosexualities, not least those focusing on the consumption of adult entertainment and the increasing co-existence of ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ leisure in the night time economy (see Maginn and Steinmitz 2014). Partly, these studies are inspired by the observation that the number of exclusively gay or lesbian pubs and bars are declining, and that the post-gay or ‘post-mo’ city (Nash 2013) is one where sexual consumption occurs in highly-visible ‘pan-sexual’ clubs, adult entertainment spaces and sex shops that are more polymorphously perverse. However, at the same time that many are emphasising the ‘new geographies of hypersexuality’ (Kalms 2017), there is also an emergent interest in the geographies of asexuality, singledom, and loneliness (Wilkinson 2014), which reminds us that geographies of sexuality are not just concerned with the way that sexuality is made visible in obvious, erotic ways, but also those ‘quiet’ spaces and moments that help reproduce sexual norms and cultural standards (Phillips, 2006).

So despite the apparent perception that geographers have little to say about sexuality beyond simply mapping the shifting boundaries of ‘gaybourhoods’ (see Brown 2014) or ‘red light districts’ and adult entertainment zones (see Maginn and Steinmitz 2014), there are clearly many ways that geographical perspectives have enriched the study of human sexuality. But this noted, it is somewhat disappointing to note there has been little work in *Sexualities* which explicitly foregrounds questions of space and place. Admittedly, there have been some notable and important exceptions – e.g. Audrey Yue’s (2016) analysis of queer Asian mobilities, Kath Browne’s (2012) work on gay marriage, Natalie Oswin’s (2014) paper on Singapore’s heteronormative family policies, David Bell’s (2006) paper on dogging sites, Mark Davis et al on locational safety in online hook-up apps, Amber Martin’s (2014) analysis of feminised sex shops and Michael Atkins and Mary Laing’s (2014) study of the spaces of male street sex work to name but a few. But alongside these are any number of papers which consider sexuality with barely any recognition that sexuality always has a spatial context, even when that work is culturally-situated and seeking to understand to ‘describe, analyse, theorise and critique the changing nature of the social organization of human sexual experience in the late modern world’ (as this journal aims to do). At times this occlusion is unproblematic, but at others it appears that sexual practice and identity is being subject to a violent abstraction, with the researcher forgetting that sexuality always has a geography as well as a biography. The sexual self is always a spatialized self.

In the rest of this short intervention I want to underline this argument by highlighting the ongoing contribution geography makes in studies of sexuality (and here I also want to stress that although the journal's aims acknowledge the particular importance of social geography in studies of sexuality, the understanding of sexuality's situatedness in the world also requires consideration of its economic, political and environmental geographies). To make this argument, I want to briefly explore why space still matters in matters of sexual conduct – even in an era when social media has virtualised sex in a number of strong ways (and here we should think not just of online porn, sex-bots and mobile ‘hook up’ apps, but also the way message boards and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are used by sexual minorities and communities of interest to communicate, make contact with others, organise events, create networks, and tell the stories of their lives).

Here, perhaps the most important implication of the emergence of a virtual ‘space of flows’ over the last two decades is that sexuality needs to be considered in a wider, and inevitably, global context: as Binnie (2014: 595) notes, “given the intensification of networked links and resources within queer cyberspace, it is hard to retain the tenability of assertions of queer cultural life within one locality remaining uninformed by events, practices and values from elsewhere”. One symptom of this virtualisation is an internationalisation and suburbanisation of the lesbian and gay lifestyles which have, until recently, been most vividly associated with the metropolitan centres of the West (Tongson 2014). But while this implies that it is now less important to focus on the largest cities, this is countered by the observation that the space of flows continues to be anchored in such world cities, which are meeting grounds where global business people, tourists, immigrant workers and hosts circulate and mix to varying extents, creating new and varied sexual and spatial formations. They hence continue to serve as hubs of a global network of sex and sexual commerce around which images, bodies and desires circulate voraciously (Hubbard 2013). To put it somewhat differently, these spaces constitute the sphere of the possibility of the existence of *multiplicity*; that is space “as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting *heterogeneity*” (Massey, 2005: 9).

But while world cities remain privileged spaces of encounter in which subjects are ‘thrown’ together, it needs to be stressed that contemporary sexual encounters are now frequently mediated via online technologies: couples can remain connected via Skype even when

separated by work demands, sexual intimacy can be sought online via webcam sites and pornography from around the world consumed in one's own home at any time. This demands that we extend notions of the intimate to include the non-proximate (which, conversely, no longer always feels quite as distanced thanks to new technologies such as Skype, virtual reality 360 porn and remotely-activated sex toys). Here, it is worth dwelling on those *relational* understandings of space demand that we must recognize any place as simultaneously constituted through interactions which range from "from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny" (Massey, 2005: 9). This – and the fact that space is always under construction – has some important implications for studying the geographies of sexuality. Indeed, one traditional way in which it has been possible to consider the spatiality of sexuality is through mapping exercises which allow us to 'see' the emplacement of sex in the landscape (e.g. by mapping the distribution of same-sex headed households). While this important tradition has introduced a 'spatial epistemology' into the study of sexuality, such cartographic traditions have clear limits given they support a *pointilistic* view of the world in which identities are 'fixed' in places. In contrast, using conventional methods to map the fluidity and messiness of stretched-out intimacies appears nigh-on-impossible given people increasingly 'appear to invest sexually in non-human digital systems, algorithms and objects – and aim to satisfy their sexual needs alongside a densely mediated web of software systems' (Cockayne et al 2017: 15).

This implies there is considerable potential for widening our understanding of how sexuality is negotiated by exploring how human and non-humans interact in distant/mediated – as well as proximate/real – spaces (see, for example, Fredricks 2014 on online 'Party and Play'; Jones 2015 on webcam sex work or Nast 2016, on the consumption of Japanese sex-dolls). This said, there may well be dangers in reading too much into technologies which target white affluent males in the urban West, or generalising about the impacts of new mediated forms of sexuality given not everyone has equal access to information technologies. Across the globe, many still lack the type of internet speeds which would allow them to stream online content or simply lack access to the internet all together. Even those who are able to access the internet may be limited in the content they can access given some nations and telecoms providers ban adult content outright.

This last point links to what remains perhaps the most significant challenge in sexuality and space research, namely the need for its practitioners to escape the confines of an Eurocentric

world-view that typically privileges white, middle-class conceptions of sex and sexuality, sometimes to the exclusion of trans-people, the lower class, and people of colour. Even a cursory overview suggests many of the discussions concerning the spaces of sexuality remain contained within a ‘homonormative’ frame that inadvertently re-centres the position of the most privileged, white LGBT individuals (Puar 2006). As Haritaworn et al (2008) show, this often involves the analogising of race and sexuality: by isolating and contrasting the experiences of ‘gays’ (white) and ‘blacks’ (assumed heterosexual), some writers obliterate racialised sexual subjectivities and the multiple allegiances that they potentially give rise to. This is something queer theory has had to come to terms with: Spurlin (2000: 183) argued that “with its narrow Eurocentric, and therefore imperialistic gaze, queer studies has not seriously engaged how queer identities and cultural formations have taken shape and operate outside of large metropolitan locations”, the implication being that there remains need for studies of sexuality to move beyond engagement with the “proud, Prada-wearing, marriage-bound, tax-paying, legitimate citizens of the queer global city” (Manalansan 2013: 12) to embrace a messier and more varied reality. The fact that both queer studies and geography are converging on the importance of internationally-comparative and multi-sited empirical research suggest that there is then a significant opportunity to enrich the conceptual armoury of sexuality studies by challenging “Western categorical segmentations and/or assumptions of universality” and deployments of “geohistorically-specific sexual identity” (Kanai 2014: 3) through place-specific and comparative studies of sexual encounter.

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